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ABSTRACT

In school theater, if children feel that they and not the teachers have created the characters, or have influenced or created the script, songs, sets, and dance--in other words, if they "own" what they act--they act better and enjoy it more. When children do not have ownership, they go through the motions, stand where they are told, say what they are told, and usually dread the experience. When children have ownership, their acting becomes secondary to the main reason for the whole exercise, which is to help them build relationships and to cope more effectively with all the situations life is presenting them. In a school, two musicals ("Mary Poppins" and "Oz") were presented using the notion of ownership. Children were closely involved in every stage of the production; the teachers served as dispensable coaches and facilitators. The children became so deeply involved in the production that many wondered what the teachers would be doing during the performance. Teachers and students shared the responsibility for the productions, for even when the children do own the story, they still need some help in the telling. When children own a production and teachers have genuine roles to play, the process and the production will be fulfilling personally and professionally for both teachers and children. (RS)

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The Question of Ownership

'If there was something we wanted to do, it didn't matter. It was going to be the way the teachers wanted to do it.'

'We were supposed to be doing the sets, and guess who did them? The teachers. The only thing we got to paint were a few decorations to put up in the gym.'

... and, in contrast:

'Well, I never did a play like that before at school, you know what I mean? We've just never done anything like that. And it was really fun working with a group, building the props, and you know, getting costumes. It was more like a real play than a school play.'

It is becoming more and more clear that there is one reason why there are two quite different kinds of school theatre, and that is ownership. Simply stated, if children own what they act, they act better, enjoy more and learn more than if they do not own what they act. Consequently a play that children own will be a better play than one which they do not own.

By ownership we mean that children feel that they, and not the teachers, have created the characters, or have influenced or created the script, songs, sets and dance. They should feel that they took part in 'more than just the acting', and they should see teachers as dispensable helpers, not as the people controlling the show.

The role of the teacher is markedly different for each of these two forms. In the case of the teacher as director, one child stated,

'It might have been wonderful if Mr ——— wasn't running it.'

In the other case,

'It gave us kids a chance to prove to ourselves that we can do something. Most of it was all kids ... [and as an afterthought] ... Well, you [teacher] were a great help too.'

... and,

'I've been working on my song while you [teacher] were away. I might need your help on some of the high parts in the middle.'

We should not only allow but encourage children to propose and carry out solutions to problems that will arise in staging and performance, thereby increasing their ownership of the final production.

When children do not have ownership of the production; that is, when they have not been encouraged to think critically about themselves and about the characters they are asked or commanded to portray, they 'go through the motions' - pretending to be actors, pretending to be characters. They are given a script, they memorize the lines, stand wherever the director tells them they must stand, say the lines, bow and exit. This approach does little that is positive. In fact, it is almost completely negative - almost, because one thing that many of them learn is that they do not want to be part of such an ordeal again. And sadly, given these circumstances, the whole idea of theatre may in the future conjure up a negative feeling.

Many of us have been witness to plays in schools in which a child playing a character will move from one place to another on stage for the sole reason that he or she has been told by the teacher-director to do so. It is clear that the movement does not come from within - the child does not know the reason for the movement. Similarly, we hear line after line devoid of any expressive quality. Children should stand and behave and speak as they have consciously decided to stand and behave and speak; that is, in accordance with their subtexts (thoughts and emotions behind the lines), not in accordance with what the director has told them to do. When they follow this process, there is a much greater chance that they will be proud of what they have done, and they will be eager to embark on a similar venture again. Perhaps most important of all, they will have learned something from the experience: something about themselves, their peers and teachers, and something about the story they told.

Having the teacher as sole director does not come near being worthwhile for children because it uses very

few of their ideas. The end result is an over-rehearsed and over-directed travesty, and instead of being regarded as one of the high points of the year, the play is grudgingly seen as only a slight improvement on the regular routine. As one child remarked,

'Well, I guess it was more fun than doing ordinary schoolwork.'

However, if the responsibility for directing is given to the children, a productive trial and error process ensues. Children will learn much more if they are the initiators of the trials and are accountable for the errors. After all, they should be solving problems and thinking critically, with a teacher nearby as a dispensable coach or facilitator.

Some Consequences of Ownership

When children have ownership - that is, when they have been encouraged to think critically about themselves and about the characters they are going to portray - the following process occurs. They choose a script that will help them tell a story with which they can identify. They decide how to tell the story through movements and words, and because they own the way of telling, they will look forward to an opportunity to take part in such a process again. Their acting becomes secondary to the main reason for the whole exercise, which is to help them to build relationships and to cope more effectively with all the situations that life is presenting them with - indeed, not just to cope with life but to enjoy it.

The idea of children's ownership implies that there can be a sense of community activity. Children get a chance to work with other children in the school.

There was a buzz of excitement in the air because something in the school was different. Something was going on. (Falbel 1986, p. 8)

When the school begins to function as a community, barriers between children (different age, ethnicity, teacher) become less important.

'I met a lot of people that weren't in my usual route of the day.'

'Most of the kids I already knew, but I became closer to them, like Ruthann I had said hello to [before the play] but after the play, I mean, we're good friends.'

'Well, like it puts kids together in a group, and I don't think a lot of kids including myself have ever done a big project like this in school. I mean, it's not like we go up in the auditorium and do our little thing and that's it.'

Looking Within

In order to build a production where they have ownership, children should look first at themselves. They may be helped by the teacher or coach to see what there is within themselves. For, instead of being encouraged to become something that they are not, they should be helped to expand something that they already are.

Everyone has a personality made up of many interconnected facets. We all have worries, needs, beliefs, emotions, opinions and attitudes which skew our behaviour in one direction or another, or in many directions at once. When we try to expose one of these facets so that we can have a look at it, we will find that it is connected to all the others.

If we as educators believe in developing facets of children's personalities, then this assumes an underlying belief that the function of education is to develop more fully what we find in children, rather than impose constrictors upon them - to make them fit into a mould.

Let us consider an emotion - 'joy'. What are the things that make us feel joyful? In terms of theatre, what characters or situations are there that foster 'joy'? Is there something that is joyful? Let's assume the answer will be 'yes'. The job then becomes one of expanding and more fully exposing that emotion. What is it that may be joyful to the child? Is it a thing, a time, a feeling, a person, a place? When was it first noticed? Does the child ever try to recreate it through memory, position, attitude, association or planning? Answers to questions like these will help to articulate the feeling about 'joy' more clearly.

If children are called upon to deal, dramatically or otherwise, with 'joy', they will already have become more literate and at ease with saying something about 'joy', or doing something with 'joy', and even ... acting with 'joy'. The point is that they own their idea of 'joy' now. They own it because they understand it better. They begin to know it in a new way. The next step is looking at others. We can begin to know and understand others by looking at their facets and comparing them to our own.

Thus, in working with children in a school on a play, the first priority should be to get to know them as well as possible. We want them to know what resources they have available. What facets might be drawn out and what is the make-up of those facets?

Choosing the Script

If a teacher decides that it would be a good idea for children to be involved in a piece of theatre from a script, or if a principal or administrator makes that decision, time and energy must be put into helping the children to respond to the questions that should be planted in their minds: i.e. 'Is there something inside of me that is similar to what is in this script? May I expand part of myself so that the expansion and eventual exposition will be of expressive value in the telling of the story?' For if there is nothing in the script with which the children can identify, there will be no life in the telling.

These considerations will influence the choice of script, whether it is an original, an adaptation, or a set piece. An original script is one which the children write by themselves, whereas an adaptation is one that children have changed to make it more accessible for themselves. A set piece is a script that children will use 'as is'. But whatever it is, the script has to be something children can use to interpret their world.

Choosing the Cast

The casts for the two musicals which we are using as examples in this PEN (*Mary Poppins* and *Oz*) were

selected through an audition process. Auditions were held because we didn't want to pick who we thought should play each part, and because we thought it would be better for the children to pick the part that they saw as most appropriate for them. They were given small excerpts from the script a few days before the auditions were held. The children interpreted their chosen character and the situation as they saw fit. Some children had memorized the excerpts, while others used the text, but no preference was given to those who had memorized their parts. Instead, the group of kids and teachers who were responsible for choosing the cast chose the children who best portrayed the characters. Auditions had nothing to do with picking the 'best singers' or 'best actors', but with picking children who seemed most like Mary Poppins or the Scarecrow.

This process was one that all children perceived as fair. They knew, before the auditions, that if they tried out for a part and didn't get it, they would still have a role to play in the production. Even the children who didn't get the parts for which they auditioned had some sense that a good choice had been made. To our surprise, our personal and often unarticulated choices frequently did not coincide with the choices made by the group, although in the end, in both productions, it seemed that the casts couldn't have been more appropriate. This seems to be an indication that the children's intuitive sense of who could best tell the story was accurate. We believe that children's views about casting should always be taken into account.

Often there were skills that children had to learn after the auditions, and these skills were taught. But children wanted to do all that they could to become the character for which they were 'trying out', and sometimes this reached absurd heights.

'Miss Uptitis, do we have to fly for the audition?'

'No Becca, I'll teach you that!'

Facets and Characters

Once the cast was chosen, work with the children who were playing the character parts in *Oz* (an original combination of *The Wizard of Oz* and *The Wiz*) centred around discussion and action. First there was a lot of talk with each child, individually and in small informal group settings (like over lunch) so that we could get to know the children. We wanted to know what it was that had led each child to audition for a specific part, and why he or she was working so very hard on 'getting it right'.

Natasha, who played the part of the Lion, was a large, shy girl with a dream. Her dream included the touch of courage she had. There was a direct parallel between her character and that of the Lion. Because she saw it, she could see the progression that she would have to follow during the course of the play's story. This put the Lion's character within her grasp. Where and how she moved and sang came from her ideas about the Lion's initial insecurities and eventual transformation. We guided her through a process of discovering how to communicate an initial insecurity and an eventual fulfilment. She found out how very important it was to let the audience know how the Lion fitted into the story. To watch this child at the height of her success as the Lion

and as a person was majestic.

Similarly with John, playing the part of the Scarecrow, we found there were specific facets of his personality that could be linked directly to the character he was to portray. John loved falling down and he was a born comic. In rehearsal he improvised the line 'Stop, drop, and roll' (from a fire-drill routine) when the Wicked Witch set him on fire. He decided to keep the line. We encouraged this process, and a number of children added their own stamp to the script in this manner.

During the Scarecrow's song 'If I only had a brain', John was loose enough, silly enough, and blank-faced enough to show beyond doubt that he did not have a grain of brain, and that he needed a brain. His transformation to a bright scarecrow was manifested by an increased sense of camaraderie with the other characters. He seemed to go from 'dreamer' to 'doer' both as the Scarecrow and as a person.

Work on the Script: Appropriation of the Story and Characters

The back and forth discussion, exploring, trying, sorting and discarding, creates the subtexts which will be the main guides for children when they are rehearsing, presenting or performing. We must continually be asking questions in an effort to have children understand the possible meanings behind the lines and the possible interpretations that may be taken.

Once a solid and understood and owned subtext is in place, it becomes clear quite quickly that memorization as a separate task is unnecessary. The script should be considered as a guide for lines; the precise words indicated in the script are not essential to the story because the same story can be told by more than one finite set of words. Not only will children come to modify and own lines through work on the subtext, but they will also come to own the story that they are going to present. When one notices that the children memorize not only their own parts but *all* the parts in this way, it is a true indication that they own the story well enough to tell it. It also indicates that they are absorbed deeply in the activity.

An interesting test of whether children have come to use the script as a vehicle to interpret their own world is to see if they internalize and appropriate lines, ideas, props, costumes, sets, etc. from their production to their world. This certainly happened with *Mary Poppins*. As one observer stated:

The children desperately wanted to become their characters, not merely recite their lines. They wanted to identify with the whole world of *Mary Poppins*. And personal identification is the true mark of one who really cares. (Falbel 1986, p.7)

This ownership carried over into the children's homes, as Megan (a child playing the part of the Cook) revealed:

'When my Mom gave me peas at supper I told her "I wouldn't eat those peas if you heaped me with all the jewels in Christendom" [taken from the line in Mary Poppins, "I wouldn't stay in this house another minute if you heaped me with all the jewels in Christendom"] and you know what she said?'

'What?'

'Well, hip hip hooray, and don't stumble on the way out, dearie!' [The next line from the script; even the mother knew the lines!]

When we work with the material that we find within ourselves and relate it to the story that we would like to communicate, the chances are higher that when we tell the story theatrically it will have depth to it. Instead of standing like pegs on a board, concerned about the next line they are supposed to say, children will be thinking about the subtext under the line of the person who is speaking at the time.

When we speak to people during the course of the day, we are constantly trying to understand why they say the things they do and why they behave in certain ways. We are trying to find their subtexts. We are trying to understand them. Does it not then make sense that if some actors are acting out a play, the audience should also spend time watching people trying to understand others? *This is quite different from watching people pretend to be others.* It follows that if the actors are spending a great deal of time thinking as the characters they have created, the audience will spend time savouring the characters. What better way to tell a story than to have everyone in the room (theatre) thinking, learning, watching, believing and understanding?

Telling the Audience the Story

In the theatre audiences have an intuitive understanding about characters. It comes down to whether or not a character is believable. What makes a person 'believable'? Certainly, it has a great deal to do with honesty. So it is with characters on the stage. If there is an honest representation, the character will be believable. If the actors, in presenting the story, do not abuse the 'willing suspension of disbelief' by being shallow, and thereby in some sense dishonest in their characterizations, the characters and the story should become quite real to the audience. The depth or honesty will result in much greater enjoyment, not only for the audience, but also for the actors.

Members of an audience can tell immediately whether or not there is a problem in the acting of a play. They may not be able to pinpoint what the problem is, but they will know if one exists. They can identify the 'good parts' and the 'bad parts' and they can discuss them later. Experience of school productions has shown us that the 'good parts' are the parts that the children own - the lines and the actions that have come about as a result of their explorations.

Often with the 'teacher as sole director' model, the parts which the children own are the parts that are identified as 'good' by the audience and the children, but as 'bad' by the teacher. The converse is true too: the parts that the teacher owns are identified as 'bad' by the children and the audience, but as 'good' by the teacher.

Children who work to own their production are children who are very pleased with the results of their efforts. On the other hand, children who speak and move

the way the teacher-director dictates do not find much pleasure in 'putting things on' for parents or any other sea of benevolent faces. Children who own their work feel that they have worked very hard. The others do not.

Teacher: 'Did you work hard on the play?'

Child: 'I don't know. I guess so.'

... contrasted with:

'We had a school play called "Mary Poppins" that took a long time and a lot of work. It turned out to be a terrific play.'

... and a comment by a teacher between acts:

'There is a professional drama person in the audience who says that he's never seen such a good school play, and that you all look like professional actors and actresses.'

... and a child's reply:

'So what does he think we are?'

Well, they are.

The deepest involvement is perhaps indicated when children seem to forget that the teacher ever had a role in the production, or are puzzled about what the teacher is going to do on the night of the performance. When one child asked one of us, 'Are you coming to the show tonight?' and another asked, 'What are you going to be?', these were solid indications that they believed they owned everything they were doing. In fact, we, teachers and children, shared the responsibility for the production, for even when the children do own the story, they still need some help in the telling. In this case, a teacher conducted the chorus, and by doing so was helping in the telling of the story.

Finally, let our experience assure you that when children own a production and teachers have genuine roles to play, the process and the production will be fulfilling personally and professionally for both teachers and children.

References

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Mark Danby and Rena Uptis are colleagues at the Faculty of Education, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, and share a particular interest in children's theatre.